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SUBJECT: LITHUANIAN PARLIAMENT SPEAKER'S TENUOUS HOLD COULD
HERALD CHANGES IN GOVERNMENT

¶1. SUMMARY: Less than a year after television showman and novice politician Arunas Valinskas secured a spot in Lithuania's coalition government for his brand-new National Revival Party (NRP) and won the Seimas (parliament) Speaker's post for himself, his party has split. Moreover, President Grybauskaitė has urged Valinskas to resign after he was accused in media reports of associating with an organized-crime figure. Valinskas has refused to step down, saying the Seimas, which reconvenes September 10, should decide whether he ought to keep his post. Whether he remains in office or not, the fractures in his party probably will prompt a redistribution of Cabinet positions this autumn. End summary.

¶2. NRP was largely the creation of Valinskas, who has hosted several popular shows on Lithuanian TV. Founded at a time when the economy had reversed course after years of strong growth, and when the government of former Prime Minister Gediminas Kirkilas was unpopular and mistrusted, NRP campaigned as being new and fresh, and won votes far beyond expectations in autumn 2008 Seimas elections. NRP became the second largest of four parties in the governing coalition and was awarded two ministerial posts and the Speaker's chair for Valinskas. But almost immediately, the party's popularity began to dissipate. Political analysts and Seimas members attributed the decline to missteps by Valinskas and to disillusionment that the party, which had portrayed itself as being outside the existing political system, had quickly become part of that system. "We were TV stars, popular," said Laimontas Dinius, the party's parliamentary elder (and a 1980s pop-music star). "But with the financial crisis, we had to pass unpopular legislation. That was very unexpected for our voters, who thought we would keep acting like TV stars." (Dinius, one of the only party members with previous government experience, had been a city council member in Siauliai, a large provincial city. He is now a leader of the faction that opposes Valinskas.)

¶3. Media turned on Valinskas when he instituted restrictions on coverage of the Seimas and when the coalition government abolished tax breaks on the purchase of newspapers and other publications (and nearly every other product not already subject to value-added tax). Valinskas announced his candidacy for president last spring, then withdrew from the race when he failed to collect 20,000 valid signatures supporting his candidacy. By the time of the European Parliament elections in June, the magic was gone -- even the party's own candidates said they expected to lose badly, which they did.

¶4. Talk of an impending split within the NRP had been circulating since spring. In July Valinskas and his supporters created the new Oak faction but remained within the National Revival Party, and Valinskas was still titular head of the party. The remaining larger faction, whose 13 members initially kept the National Revival name, had expressed dissatisfaction with the Culture and Environment ministers named by the party late last year.

15. Valinskas' already shaky political career took another hit in mid-August when Lietuvos Rytas, Lithuania's largest daily newspaper, reported that Valinskas has had frequent contact with Rolandas Michalskis, a member of an organized-crime group in Kaunas, Lithuania's second-largest city. The newspaper reported that Valinskas had, on behalf of Michalskis, sought information about an investigation into the group's activities. Michalskis has a criminal record and currently faces extortion charges. His wife is an NRP member (but not an elected official). The report about Valinskas and Michalskis resonated with the media and the public and has filled the airwaves and newspapers in the slow August news season.

16. Opposition parties threatened to impeach Valinskas (impeachment being an oft-attempted but rarely successful tactic in the Lithuanian parliament). President Grybauskaite met privately with Valinskas and suggested he act honorably and resign, then repeated her comments to the media. Valinskas asked prosecutors and Lithuania's security services whether they had any information concerning criminal activity on his part; they said they did not. Prime Minister Kubilius on August 25 suggested a pause of a few days to allow emotions on all sides to calm. He said the Seimas would consider the issue in September, but also said that Valinskas should consider the opinion of the president and the public in making his own decision. He pointedly said he did not disagree with the president's comments.

17. The latest scandal has exacerbated the friction between the two NRP factions (and it's likely the newspaper first got its information from someone in the non-Valinskas faction). Valinskas has filed a defamation suit against Seimas member

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Aleksandr Sacharuk, a former organized-crime prosecutor now among the leaders of the larger NRP faction, over Sacharuk's comments about Valinskas and organized crime. On August 27, leaders of that faction said they would abandon the NRP name and form a new political party, but wished to remain in the governing coalition. They also said they would work for Valinskas' removal from the Speaker's chair.

18. Whether or not Valinskas keeps the Speaker's post, the NRP split likely will prompt some realignment of the governing coalition this fall, and also some redistribution of Cabinet posts. Valinskas' Oak faction has fewer parliamentarians than any other faction in the coalition government, yet controls two Cabinet posts plus the Speaker's chair. The other NRP group, with 13 members, is now the second-largest faction, yet controls no positions; its leaders have said they deserve the right to name two ministers. (Dinius, the former pop star, is rumored to want the Culture Minister's job for himself.)

19. COMMENT: The rise and continuing fall of Speaker Valinskas has been a diverting sideshow, but has not yet had much effect on the government's or parliament's ability to function. Even his opponents have told us that Valinskas is very smart, learned fast and has managed the parliament's activities adequately. If the current imbroglio is protracted, though, it would take the parliament's attention away from much more important business at a time when Lithuania is in severe financial straits and needs an attentive and responsible legislature. Any realignment of the governing coalition or Cabinet, however, is unlikely to lead to significant change in the GOL's outlook or its actions on issues of importance to the United States. End comment.

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